

BULGARIA AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Modern Bulgaria is building its presence and future as part of the democratic societies in the world. Bulgarian interests, ratified agreements and conventions are the foundation of the country's structure and policy. Priorities of the Bulgarian policy are loyalty and the mutual benefit in relation with other countries and international unions. That attitude confirms Bulgaria as a source of security and common defense. The will expressed by it for NATO membership is with the purpose of guarantee of the security and is not aimed against third countries. The membership in the European Union (EU) expressed the will of the Bulgarian society to share the values and responsibilities of the western family. The intent of the Bulgarian society is, with the help of EU and USA, to ensure future prosperity of the country and to serve as a key partner of the democratic processes in Eastern Europe. In stability and predictability to our allies NATO and EU, Bulgarians see their future and their contribution to the region and the world.

BULGARIA AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

History may state that Bulgaria transitioned from communism to democracy quickly. However, for the Bulgarians who are surviving in this “interesting” period of history know that the transition was and continues to be a very painful and time consuming process. Seventeen years after the collapse of the government of the communists and fall of its last General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the State Council and Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Todor Zivkov, Bulgarians are still living in hard conditions and still looking forward to their desired lifestyle. Already a member in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Bulgarian’s economy is far from the economies of the leading countries in the EU, which is a goal for the Bulgarians. Bulgarian citizens are rather pessimistic of their future and continue to suffer in this transition period. The transition led to a rapid social stratification that hurt many while it privileged a few. Many lives were destroyed and many hopes betrayed during the time of transition.¹ High levels of corruption, not very effective judicial systems, and other social problems make people feel miserable and pessimistic.

But despite the difficulty, Bulgaria has made huge strides from the closest ally of the Soviet Union and member of the Warsaw Pact to a full member of NATO and EU and from a centrally governed communist state to a pluralistic market-orientated democracy.² Now the country recognizes and follows its European and Trans-Atlantic future. Bulgaria adopted the policy to serve as a center of stability and prosperity in the East Balkans. But Bulgaria still has issues. During the years different Bulgarian governments have had different views for the present and future of the country, but it is

obvious that the prosperity of the country goes hand-in-hand with European and NATO relationships. As a partner, Bulgaria plays a significant role in the stability of the region and contributes to the democratic processes in the world.

The research reveals the processes of accession into EU and NATO, analyzes the current policy of stability and predictability of the country, and provides recommendations for future development to improve Bulgaria as a key strategic partner.

The Communist Heritage and Path to the NATO and EU

The collapse of the Soviet System in 1989 opened the door for democratic changes in all East and Central European countries. Collapse of the Bulgarian communist system occurred in November 1989. It was natural that the Communist party continued to lead the country. This also happened in other East European countries, with the exception of Poland. At that time the Communist party was the only one that had a real structure, disciplined members, and educated people capable to take the power. They also had access to the economic and informational power of the state. Despite the fact that a lot of observers and analysts find these transitions very similar in all East European countries, each country had its unique approach and path towards this process. In Bulgaria, for example, the Communist party succeeded not only to stay in power but also to influence the process of transition for a very long period of time.

One of the key elements of that time was concealing the files of the former secret services concerning the agents of the internal political services. Many of the files just disappeared and that undermined the process of adopting "Law on lustration." That did not happen in central European countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Lustration is the policy of limiting the participation of former communists, and

especially informants of the Communist secret police, in the successor governments or even in civil service positions. Generally in the beginning of the transition it was not very clear which direction the country would take. What would replace the Communist Party's monopoly on power and truth, however, was less clear in Bulgaria than anywhere else in Central Europe. Bulgaria was the one country in which a European destiny was not necessarily taken for granted at the end of the Cold War, and significant segments of the Communist elite saw a Russian orientation as a serious alternative to the European integration.³ Also the close relationships of the Bulgarian elite with the Soviet leaders during the Cold War made them suspicious of the U.S. and NATO. This kind of resistance to the Euro-Atlantic future of the country lasted longer in Bulgaria than any other country of the former Soviet Bloc. Moreover, the population of Bulgaria, driven by the inertia of the Soviet times, found the first democrats strange rather than serious and innovative. This in addition helped the Communist's elite in their effort to preserve their political and economic positions and their ties with Moscow.

In an attempt to show a new face as a party in transformation, the former Communist Party renamed itself the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). In the same year an opposition party was formed in Bulgaria. The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) represented the wish of different thinking Bulgarians. In the first democratic elections in June 1990, the better organized BSP won the elections but were forced to turn over power after street protests in December of the same year. In 1991, a coalition led by UDF won the majority of the voices but depended on parliamentary majorities of the small Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF), but with its inexperience in governance was not able to achieve significant changes. In 1992 the power was shifted

to a Socialist-led government of technocrats. With the nostalgia for the comfortable old torpor promised by the Socialists' opposition to unsettling market reforms, rural votes returned the old apparatchiks to office in 1994 with a majority of seats in the assembly.⁴ The Socialist party was not reformed yet and pretending reforms⁵ led the country to the deepest crises during its transitional period. In 1996 the Socialist government of Jhan Videnov was forced to resign because of a deep economic and financial crisis. It was obvious that new national priorities were needed.

Bulgaria declared its orientation and its wish to belong to Euro- Atlantic society in 1997 after the fall of the Socialist government of Jhan Videnov. These days of dramatic events marked the shift of Bulgarian orientation. Nothing in the seven years since the end of the cold war had prepared Bulgaria for the sharp turn it now made in setting an irrevocable course toward joining the EU by implementing the prerequisite reforms, however turbulent the domestic consequences might be. The shift began with the six weeks of daily protest by young people in downtown Sofia against the bank collapse, hyperinflation, and the plunging standard of living.⁶ The year 1997 served as a turning point in the orientation of Bulgaria's new history and new beginning. The subsequent Bulgarian governments took the pro-western orientation of the country for granted. People of Bulgaria led by the UDF clearly and unequivocally expressed their wish and orientation.

The European Union

After the fall of the Communist regime, the membership in EU was not as controversial as relations with NATO and Washington. Bulgaria established diplomatic relations with the EU in 1988. In 1993, the European Association Agreements were

signed and they entered into force in 1995. In December 1995 Bulgaria submitted its application for EU membership. In 1997 the real reforms began in order to bring the country's economic, democratic, and legal systems in accordance with European standards. The Commission presented its first Regular Report on Bulgaria's progress towards accession in November 1998. The second report, released in 1999, recommended that formal negotiations be opened. Accession negotiations between Bulgaria and the EU started on 15 February 2000. Accession talks concluded on 15 June 2004, six months ahead of schedule. The Brussels European Council of 17 December 2004 confirmed the conclusion of accession negotiations with Bulgaria. In April 2005, the Accession Treaty with Bulgaria was signed and passed to the parliaments of the twenty-five member states for ratification. The European Commission's progress report for Bulgaria issued in October 2005 revealed some problems in the field of justice, internal affairs, and the integration of the Roma minority. The slow implementation of reforms was partly because of political negotiations after parliamentary elections in 2005 and partly because the reformation of the judicial system, fighting organized crime and integration of the Roma minority are among of the hardest issues of Bulgaria. There was a real threat for EU accession to be postponed for one year. The government took urgent measures, but Bulgaria had to wait for the next progress report in October 2006. The successful report led to full membership in the EU in January 2007.

The support for the European Union membership in Bulgaria has always been high. The level of approval in August 2005 was 59%. It dropped a little bit at the end of 2005, because of the fear of a loss of national identity and quality of life, but remains

one of the highest in EU countries.⁷ Sofia also supports the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). At the end of 2005, 78% of the Bulgarians supported ESDP, one point higher than the average of current EU member states. With 70% approval, Bulgaria also supports Common Security and Foreign Policy (CSFP) of the EU. Sofia supports CFSP but will also remain close to Washington in order to defend its security interests; should new disputes between Europe and the United States occur, Sofia should aim to facilitate dialogue rather than choose sides.⁸ This opinion of the Bulgarian officials expressed the opinion of the ordinary citizens. For the majority of the Bulgarians, EU and U.S. are on one side of the coin, pro-Russian orientation on the other side.

Accession in the EU was a big achievement for Bulgaria. With that accession the country finished a very important stage of its post-communist history and showed the world that Bulgarians, together with other Central and East European nations, chose democracy and a market economy instead of a totalitarian way of governing. This shows a mature position of the Bulgarian government to the processes in the world and shows concern for the destiny of Bulgarian citizens. By closing this important chapter of the development of the country, Bulgaria can focus its effort to vital problems such as prosperity of the country and its contributions to the international community. However, the membership in EU and the responsibilities to the Union can also bring some friction with the U.S., but Bulgarians believe that these kinds of disagreements are between partners, and they can be easily solved with mutual benefit.

The Accession to NATO

Bulgaria's membership in NATO was unclear in the beginning of the transition. Between 1990 and early 1997, Bulgarian governments demonstrated ambivalence concerning integration into the Alliance. Some of the political observers called this period "Seven lost years."⁹ Despite the fact that the Parliament passed a declaration in December 1993 on the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country and on 14 February 1994 the country signed the Partnership for Peace Framework Document, there were no real aspirations to develop close relationships with NATO. The Socialist Party, actually, undermined any attempt to establish solid relationship with the Alliance, and after its overwhelming electoral victory in 1994, put the relations on hold. The BSP did not view NATO as a necessary component of the country's security, and Alliance membership was not considered a foreign policy priority. The BSP's 1995 National Security Concept confirmed that "Bulgaria may seek NATO membership only after the Alliance transformed itself into one of the elements of a pan-European security framework in which Russia would have a major role." In 1996 the BSP declared that it did not want to pursue Alliance membership.¹⁰

The collapse of the socialist government in early 1997 dramatically changed Bulgaria's approach to cooperation with and integration into the international community. Bulgaria saw membership in NATO and the EU not only as a reliable source of security guarantees but also as a natural expression of the country's foreign policy orientation. At first, in February 1997, the caretaker government of Stefan Sofianski officially submitted Bulgaria's application for NATO membership. After that, UDF won the elections in 1997 the Ivan Kostov government not only reoriented the country's foreign policy but also altered its approach to security. The government of the

UDF made considerable effort after 1997 to implement wide ranging military reforms, and more importantly, end Bulgaria's self-imposed isolation and convince the Alliance of the benefit of the country's membership. Bulgaria approved its National Security Concept in April 1998, a Military Doctrine in April 1999, a Defense Plan in October 1999, and Partnership Goals in April 2000. The government also established an inter-departmental structure, co-chaired by the foreign and defense ministers and an integration council in the Ministry of Defense, to coordinate NATO integration.¹¹

One of the first tests, for Kostov's government policy was the crisis in Kosovo in 1999. The government of UDF granted over-flight rights to the Alliance and provided logistical support to NATO forces in Kosovo with parliamentary approval. Both Prime Minister Kostov and President Petar Stoyanov urged Belgrade to end the war and imposed sanctions on Serbia.¹² Bulgaria also played an important role in avoiding a possible crisis in relations between NATO and Russia by denying Russian forces over-flight rights during the same crisis.

The fight between Sofia and Moscow was a helluva big fight. The Russians threatened all kind of retaliation. The Russian ambassador was in the [Bulgarian] Foreign Ministry banging on the table, saying people were dying in the Pristina airport because they did not have water and food. Foreign Minister Nadezhda Mihailova immediately phoned NATO Commander Wesley Clark, explaining that the Russian ambassador in her office was worried about the survival of the Russian soldiers at the airport, and asking if NATO could help. Clark responded, "It is done deal. We will give them everything that they need." Bulgaria kept its airspace close.¹³

It must be admitted, however, that the government's decision to support NATO in the conflict was made over the public's disapproval. UDF was the only party which unequivocally supported the NATO air campaign. BSP strongly objected and frequently criticized the agreement between the Alliance and the government. Public resistance

reflected the perception of an acute threat to national security and exposed the public's belief in neutrality during conflicts in the Balkans.

The end of allied air strikes in Yugoslavia did not diminish the growing cooperation between NATO and Bulgaria. The need to maintain multinational forces in Kosovo and the beginning of a new conflict, this time in neighboring Macedonia, gave Bulgaria another chance to enhance its status among the aspiring membership candidates. In March 2001, the government agreed to sign an agreement allowing NATO forces to use Bulgarian territory, including the establishment of military bases, in the event of a Balkan crisis. Remarkably, all political parties represented in the Parliament supported the agreement, and it was approved without the usual resistance from the Socialist Party. In fact, the successful conclusion of the Alliance's air campaign against Serbia marked the transformation of the BSP's position on the country's membership in NATO. After a relatively short and uncontroversial intra-party debate, the Socialists decided to embrace NATO membership as the only politically attainable means to guarantee national security. The change in the BSP's long-standing opposition to NATO was an attempt by the party leadership to transform the party into a modern social-democratic organization and position itself as a potential coalition partner.

Sofia's 7-year uncertainty about joining NATO delayed significant participation of the country in peacekeeping operations. The beginning of Bulgaria peacekeeping experience was in Cambodia in 1992, followed by: Angola 1995-1997; Tajikistan 1995-2001; Ethiopia and Eritrea 2000-2001; Bosnia-Herzegovina 1997- present; Kosovo 2000- present; and Afghanistan since 2002.¹⁴ Now Bulgaria tries to keep forces available for NATO peacekeeping operations. The country also participates and

organizes joint exercises and funds education of the military personnel for peacekeeping operations.

Bulgaria achieved full membership in NATO on 18 March 2004 during the mandate of the National Movement Simeon II (NMS). The former Bulgarian king and current Prime Minister, Simeon Sax-Coburgotski, signed the agreement for the Bulgarian side. Since its formal accession, Bulgaria has proven to be a committed ally to the Alliance. In 2004, the country was one of only seven member states that met the requirements of over 2% of the budget funding for the armed forces. In 2005-2007, it was around 2.65%. In 2008, it is going to be 2.1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country.¹⁵ Sofia also tries to participate actively in NATO's Rapid Reaction Forces (RRF). In 2005, it sent a platoon of nuclear, chemical, and biological protection specialists to the RRF and intends to increase the units in RRF. Bulgaria has hosted a number of NATO exercise; most important of them is Cooperative Key in the summer in 2005, involving 1,600 personnel and more than 60 aircraft.¹⁶ From January 2006 to 2007, the Multinational Southeastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG), sent to Afghanistan to maintain security in Kabul and adjacent areas, was under Bulgarian command.¹⁷ Sofia also considers NATO as a vital component for the national security of the country and stability in the Balkans. Membership in the Alliance is a long term activity for Bulgaria.

Relationships with the United States

The role of the U.S. in the Central East Europe (CEE) was increased after the fall of communism. The U.S. served as a symbol of democracy, free speech, human rights, high living standards, and unlimited opportunities. For many Bulgarians, relationship

with the U.S. was seen as a factor for limiting Russian influence in the country and also as a guarantee for national security. The U.S. was more trusted than West European powers that were seen as having betrayed Bulgaria and other CEE states at the close of the Second World War in acquiescing to Soviet domination.¹⁸ Bulgarian-United States post-Cold War relationships remained limited during the ruling of the Socialist governments from 1989-1991 and 1995-1997. These governments preferred to maintain close relations with Moscow and worked to have Bulgaria tied to the Russian alliance.

Cooperation between the United States and Bulgaria increased after the Euro-Atlantic shift in 1997. In 1998 bilateral groups started working in areas of economic, military, and law enforcement. In November 2001 the U.S. Congress passed the Gerald Solomon Freedom Consolidation Act granting military assistance for \$10 million. That assistance was blocked in 2003 when Bulgaria refused to sign a bilateral agreement with the U.S. concerning protection of American citizens from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Bulgaria chose to resist Washington under pressure from EU as well as from domestic issues. This episode did not seriously undermine relationships between the two countries, and when Bulgaria joined the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq with a battalion size unit in the fall of 2003, the assistance was again approved.

Despite the fact that Sofia did not sign the bilateral agreement for ICC, Sofia made itself useful to the United States, especially after the 9/11 terrorist strikes in New York and Washington.¹⁹ During the period 2002-2003, when Bulgaria was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, it constantly supported the U.S. position towards Iraq. Something more in February 2003, the country was warned by the French

President Jacques Chirac that its pro-American position might endanger the prospects of attaining EU membership.²⁰ Bulgaria supported the U.S. anti-terrorist campaign by offering air, land, and sea transit to coalition forces in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 2001, Sofia signed a bilateral agreement on cooperation in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and offered Sarafovo airport on the Black Sea coast, permitting the operation of U.S. aircraft for refueling and cargo-lifting.²¹ Bulgaria also fulfilled two particularly U.S. demands to destroy existing Soviet medium-range missiles SS-23 and to reduce sales of small arms. Since Communist times, sales of small arms were very profitable for Bulgaria, but that was dramatically reduced. Bulgaria facilitated a joint American-Russian law enforcement operation to remove 37 pounds of weapons-grade uranium from Bulgarian reactors to safeguard the material against terrorist theft.²²

The Bulgarian decision to deploy troops to Iraq was political. The government of Simeon Sax-Coburgotski desired to break with the unsustainable policy of neutrality, which dominated during the early and mid- 1990s. Research of public opinion of that time shows that 48% believe that military conflict with Iraq was unjustified; 26% believed that the actions were warranted; and 26% had no opinion on the question.²³ Despite the favorable public attitude toward the United States, Bulgarians generally were against the war. Also the decision of the government was influenced by the desire to seek benefits of a stronger partnership with the United States, and hopes that to recover \$2 billion debt that the Saddam regime owed Bulgaria. The result is that in the fall of 2003, Bulgaria sent almost 500 soldiers to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The country remained strong when in 2004 two Bulgarian drivers were kidnapped with demands for Bulgaria to withdraw its contingent from coalition forces and Iraq. It was interesting that

during that crisis almost 90 percent of the population supported the position of the government not to give in to the terrorists' threats, but in general the Bulgarian public retained its attitude against the war. ²⁴

In 2005, the new Bulgarian government, dominated by the BSP and led by the young socialist leader Sergey Stanishev stated that Bulgaria would leave Iraq when its designated term finished at the end of 2005. At the same time consultations with the U.S. were going on how Bulgaria would continue to contribute to the stability in Iraq after withdrawal. Actually this government was the first center-left government in the region, but it quickly announced priorities of ensuring EU membership by 2007 and continuing macroeconomic and financial stability. In other words it did not change the current external policy of the country. Moreover, in order to maintain good relationship with the U.S., in December 2005 the government announced and the parliament approved a noncombatant humanitarian mission to protect the refugee camp "Ashraf" close to the Iranian border. At that time, total Bulgarian casualties were thirteen soldiers and six civilians. ²⁵

Despite the fact that the war in Iraq was unpopular among the Bulgarians, the coalition government led by BSP found the way to continue to support the U.S. in Iraq. Also the same government finalized the process started by the Simeon Sax-Coburgotski to open American bases in Bulgaria. In addition, the President of Bulgaria-Georgi Parvanov, who belonged to the Socialist Party during his meeting in October 2005 with President Bush in Washington, sealed the deal on opening three American "lily pad" bases in Bulgaria. ²⁶ This shows that relationships with the U.S. remain predictable no matter the political party or coalition in power. That shows also that there

is no alternative to Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country. To maintain its security Bulgaria needs close relationships with the U.S. Establishment of U.S. bases in Bulgaria are recognition of the effort of the country to be reliable partner.

Bulgarian Interests and Security Policy

The current Bulgarian interest and security policy was adopted after the political shift in 1997. The government of UDF led by Prime Minister and leader of the party Ivan Kostov, and supported by the president of the country, Peter Stoyanov, from the same party, formulated the priorities of the country. Previously in the paper it became clear that the priorities established by the right-wing government of UDF were not challenged by following the centrist government of Simeon Sax-Coburgotski and the left-centrist government of Sergey Stanishev. All Bulgarian governments after 1997 stay the course and Bulgarian society took this orientation for granted. Now we can say that in Bulgaria there are a lot of arguments concerning development of the economy, taxation, education, corruption, or health care, but there are no serious arguments challenging the orientation of the country's national interests and security.

The government of UDF was the first one that tied the western orientation of the country with the security issue. The Concept of National Security was approved by the Bulgarian Parliament in April 1998.²⁷ In the document, Bulgaria admits that the country is unable to ensure its own security or to seek security through neutrality because of insufficient financial, economic, and military potential. The Concept identifies integration in EU and NATO, along with participation in the globalization process as the means to address these shortages.²⁸ That shows that Bulgarian leaders realized that the Euro-Atlantic connection is vital for the country. Now in Bulgaria we have a consensus about

this question. This makes the country's external policy predictable and at the same time strong. The Concept of National Security reveals and recognizes responsibilities of the state towards organizations that belong to the international community as well. This makes Bulgaria not only a consumer of economic help and security, but also a reliable partner that recognizes its obligations and commitments. The document identifies that the regional stability is a key factor for stability and security of the country and a field where Bulgaria can successfully contribute to international security.

Regional Policy

Seeking security, Bulgaria defined in its policy the attitude of the country towards other Balkans countries. Based on Concept of National Security, Military Doctrine was adopted in 1999 and updated in 2002.²⁹ As a logical continuation of Concept of National Security and Military Doctrine, the government approved the Military Strategy.³⁰ Also in 2002 by initiative of the Minister of Defense, Nikolay Svinarov, White Paper of the Bulgarian Army was approved and published.³¹ All these documents intended to make clear Bulgarian external policy and mainly the relationships of the country with its Balkans neighbors. In a notorious region such as the Balkans, Bulgaria's goal is to serve as a center of stability and prosperity. Bulgaria wants to use an active foreign policy as a means to support peace and security in the Balkans. Crises in the neighboring country are seen not in the form of a direct military challenge but rather as the existence of conditions for the development of organized crime and corruption and for the isolation of Bulgaria from the process of integration in the Western institutions.³² These conditions jeopardize the stability of the Bulgarian state institutions whose integrity is a precondition for national security. In other words, the regional threats to

national security are not in the form of direct military challenges to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bulgaria, but in their effects on the capacity of the country to reform and integrate into Western institutions.³³

Bulgaria's perception of regional and limited threats to its national security were also evident in its Military Doctrine, which did not envision any direct military threat but defined any armed conflict in the Balkans as potentially bringing the challenges already identified in the Security Concept.³⁴ Bulgaria seeks security in the Balkans and is against any military and political unions in the Balkans. The country does not have any territorial claims and does not recognize such. This principle destroys the old and does not create any new regional tensions.³⁵ Policy of the country is towards security to create a favorable environment for development and prosperity for the region. The Bulgarian vision is that no one country in the region can prosper without stability and prosperity of the whole region. Political and economical achievements of all Balkan countries are achievements for the region.

Following its policy, Bulgaria maintains good relations with all of its neighbors. Sofia was the first capital to recognize independence of Macedonia in 1992. Bulgaria supports Serbia's efforts to become a member in Euro-Atlantic organizations and to overcome the difficult post-Milosevic period. The country established good relations with Greece. Several common initiatives are going on along the Bulgarian-Greek border including opening of new roads and the Burgas- Aleksandropolis pipeline. Bulgaria supported Turkey in its wish to become an EU member and maintain a good trade and investment relationship. The Bulgarian path to NATO and EU was tied to the Romanian one. Both countries went together to their changes to market economy and democracy. Also, we

are going to build a new bridge across the Danube River in order to increase economic ties between the two countries; this bridge will be also part of one of the European transcontinental corridors.

Bulgaria played a leading role in a number of regional initiatives. One of these initiatives is the multinational South East European Brigade (SEEBRIG). The member nations in this initiative are Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Romania, and Turkey; observer nations are the United States, Slovenia, and Croatia. The agreement signed by the member nations declares SEEBRIG to be available for possible employment in UN or Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – mandated, NATO- or EU- led conflict prevention and other peace support operations,” except peace enforcement operations. The deployment issue is placed on the top of the priority list of member nations.³⁶ The Brigade was established in October 1998, and the first host nation for a term of four years was Bulgaria, offering headquarters for the Brigade in the city of Plovdiv. The Brigade was certificated fully operational capable in 2004 by the Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples. From February to August 2006, the brigade was deployed to Afghanistan and took responsibility for the Kabul region. The commanding officer was Bulgarian Brigadier General Neyko Nenov.

The Bulgarian regional initiative of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECPP) was launched in 1996. At the Bulgaria-chaired meeting in Sofia, the SEE countries laid the foundations for regional cooperation to create an atmosphere of trust, neighborly relations, and stability.³⁷ Now, eleven countries of SEE participate in the initiative. A special characteristic of SEECPP is that it is an original form of cooperation among the countries in the region launched on their own initiative and not on the

initiative of some other international organization or country. In that regard, the SEECP seeks to define itself as an authentic voice of SEE, complementary to the Stability Pact, Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), or the Stabilization and Association Process.

Following its strategy of active regional policy, Bulgaria plays an important role in the Kosovo question. Maintaining good relations with both Serbia and Kosovo, Bulgaria tries to influence the process of negotiations in order to preserve stability in the region. Since both countries did not reach a mutual understanding about the sovereignty of Kosovo at the end of last year, the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivailo Kalfin, visited Belgrade and Pristine in an attempt to continue the process. Bulgaria has a constant position of involving NATO and EU in the negotiation process and achieving agreement between the two nations. The U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice recognized that in a statement on 4 January 2008 in Washington. At their meeting with Minister Kalfin, she said that the U.S. highly valued Bulgarian's constructive role and its position towards Kosovo.³⁸

Bulgaria is also involved in a variety of regional initiatives concerning energy market, communications, building of Trans-European transport corridors, and trade. The economic factor is decisive for the guarantee of national security. Only the stabilization, reestablishment, and growth of Bulgarian economy are in a position to satisfy the interests of the Bulgarian citizens, society, and state.³⁹ In addition to the economic and security interests, Bulgarians are also concerned for the democratic processes in the region. Sofia proposed establishing the Center for Democracy in Bulgaria, which would promote civil societies in neighboring states. In addition, Bulgaria's highly active NGO

sector engages in cooperative cross-regional policies and advocates that Sofia should be more active in the stabilization process by sharing its EU and NATO experiences with aspiring candidates to both organizations.⁴⁰

Recommendations

Bulgaria has already done much to establish its orientation and place in the international community. The country achieved membership in two of the most prestigious organizations in the world, NATO and the EU. It was recognized by the United States as a stable democratic country and functioning market economy. Bulgaria contributes to regional and international peace processes and plays a leading role in several of them. To confirm itself as a long term strategic partner to the democratic forces in the world and to be able to find its deserved place among the developed nations, several more things need to be done:

- The Bulgarian “elite” has to take the responsibility to reach an agreement in numerous controversial internal issues and to lead the country. Some of the Bulgarian politicians put the interest of the party before the interest of the society and the state. This problem can be solved partly by changing the law of elections. Current law gives opportunity to the political parties to decide who will be a member of the parliament. Another issue is existing files of agents and informants of former political communist police. We need clear and final procedures for revealing these files. Along with revealing them we need to adopt the law of lustration in order to prevent former Communist agents to take key governmental positions and to undermine the democratic and economical process in the country.

- In a short period of time the country has to fulfill all recommendations of the EU concerning its legal system, corruption, and integration of the Roma minority. These three areas were the most discussed before Bulgaria's accession in the EU, and they are still an issue in the country. Positive results of solving these problems will show the country's ability to meet compliance and assure its future and will be a sign to our partners that Bulgaria will meet its obligations and responsibilities.
- The government has to conduct radical changes in the Bulgarian Armed Forces in order to faster achieve modern structure and capability for NATO interoperability. Bulgaria is one of the few members' countries in NATO that has the required military budget of over 2% of the GDP, but still it is not able to ensure the required 8% of Land Forces available for Alliance operations. The reason for that is lack of equipment and training. The military will be more effective for the country and will meet the military obligation towards NATO. Bulgarian military presently can add capacity to the Alliance but only to do minimum requirements.
- Bulgaria needs to put more effort toward building and maintaining trans-continental energy, transport, and communication infrastructure on Bulgarian territory, connecting Europe with Asia and Africa. That will increase importance of the country among our partners and will allow the Bulgarian government to have a louder voice in regional and world affairs.⁴¹
- Leaders in Washington can help shape Bulgarian public opinion by dispelling the perception of unstable asymmetry in bilateral relations and demonstrating

that Bulgaria has become a long-term strategic partner. Although a U.S. presence and close bilateral relations are regarded as positive developments, there are still lingering fears that weak domestic leadership could subject Bulgaria to an unequal relationship as happened during the Soviet period.⁴²

Conclusion

Everything done during the transitional period and especially after 1997 portrays Bulgaria as a country with stable orientation and position in the region and in the world. The transitional period itself was relatively common with the other East European countries, but at the same time unique for Bulgaria. In its new history the country has made the decision to belong to the democratic society and to take its own path to achieve this. It already serves as a center of stability in the region and contributes to the world peace processes. But the transition is still not completed, and the country still has issues. Bulgarian governments need to continue implementing: economic reforms, infrastructure, energy, and communication projects. This will improve the business environment and ultimately improve the living standard and prosperity of the country. Bulgaria needs to change its elective law and prevent former Communist informants to take key governmental positions. That will enhance the active participation of the people in the democratic process and will confirm the reputation of the country as a stable democracy. Bulgaria needs to implement all recommendations of the EU. In addition, it needs to reorganize and modernize its Armed Forces in order to achieve interoperability with NATO members. That will clearly demonstrate the will of the country to meet its obligations and responsibilities towards our partners and allies. Bulgaria already belongs to the Euro-Atlantic family. The wish of Bulgarians to share benefits and

responsibilities of these relationships meet the expectations of our partners for a reliable and predictable ally. Not only do the mutual benefit and interests motivate Bulgaria in this process, but shared values as well. The intent of the Bulgarian society is, with the help of EU and U.S., to ensure future prosperity of the country and to serve as a key partner of the democratic processes in Eastern Europe. A more stable and assertive Bulgaria will be a more capable, reliable, and active partner and ally. In its stability and predictability to our allies, NATO and the EU, Bulgarians see their future and their contribution to the region and the world.

Endnotes

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